

“Contested Spaces: The Environment and Environmental Dissidence in the German Democratic Republic, 1980-1990”

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## **ABSTRACT**

JULIA AULT: “Contested Spaces: The Environment and Environmental Dissidence in the German Democratic Republic, 1980-1990”  
(Under the direction of Konrad Jarausch)

This thesis examines the role of environmental activism and dissidence in the last decade of communism in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany). It contends that rise of discontent over ecological conditions and the regime’s corresponding yet insufficient response played a more central role in the revolution of 1989-1990 than has been previously acknowledged. Though environmental groups first coalesced under the aegis of the Protestant Church, concern for the natural environment resonated more broadly within the population. These environmental activists’ organizations, protesting primarily local conditions, represented a growing subpublic which both directly and indirectly threatened the authority of the state and its ability to provide for its citizens. Particularly after the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, Ukraine in 1986, environmental issues challenged the legitimacy of the communist regime in East Germany, ultimately taking a more central role in the dissolution of the communist regime in 1989 than has been previously acknowledged.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

For World Environment Day on June 5, 1987, concerned citizens submitted a plea entitled “Chernobyl affects us all” to the East German government (German Democratic Republic, GDR,), parliament and the General German News Service.<sup>1</sup> The environmental activists appealed to the Socialist Unity Party (SED) for an end to the construction of nuclear energy plants, the transformation of the energy policy, and the disclosure of pollution levels in the air, water and soil.<sup>2</sup> Although the East German news sources in no way acknowledged the dissidents’ plea, or the growing environmental movement within East Germany, such demands reflected increasing dissatisfaction with the ruling SED leadership. Indeed, the SED had promised the protection of the environment in its constitution since 1968 and pollution remained a major problem, especially as conditions worsened and environmental awareness rose in the 1980s. The environmental dissidents thus challenged the SED regime’s lack of ecological care and dared the SED to uphold the dissidents’ interpretation its promises.

At the heart of the conflict between environmental activists and the SED lies a dual tension between the treatment of the physical environment and the control of public

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<sup>1</sup> World Environment Day began in Stockholm, Sweden in 1976 and is the official day of environmental recognition for the United Nation Environment Program. It is celebrated on June 5.

<sup>2</sup>“Tschernobyl wirkt überall‘ Appell aus der unabhängigen Friedens- und Ökologiebewegung und anderer betroffener Bürger an die Regierung und die Bevölkerung der DDR (Ausschnitt)“ *Umweltblätter*, June 5, 1987.

and the political space. On the one hand, environmental conditions and continuing ecological degradation, despite certain state-led efforts, represent a contested physical space. The environmental dissidents sought to raise awareness about ecological conditions and force the SED to take concrete steps to counteract the pollution. On the other hand, the SED and the environmental dissidents wrestled for control over the public space and allowing the free dissemination of information on this topic. By meeting, holding public events, opening libraries and publishing Samizdat (illegal or underground) newsletters, environmental dissidents challenged the SED's environmental rhetoric and policy. The SED and these dissidents thus actively engaged with one another in an effort to control information and to reinforce or question the legitimacy of the regime. Moreover, the SED was committed to caring for its citizens, who were of course affected by local environmental conditions. The concept of a socialist dictatorial state caring and providing for the needs of its citizens is part of what Konrad Jarausch has called a "welfare dictatorship."<sup>3</sup> In this case, that care also claimed to come in the form of environmental protection, creating the need for an appeal to the SED to better provide for its citizens.

The environmental conditions and dissidents in the GDR exemplify the contradiction between the ideals of the SED-state and its practices. Therefore, this master's thesis first seeks to understand how the dissidents concerned about the environment both shaped and reflected the political atmosphere in the GDR in the 1980s, particularly after the nuclear explosion at Chernobyl in 1986. Second, it endeavors to illuminate the ways in which the SED leadership sought to counter attacks from

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<sup>3</sup> Konrad Jarausch, "Care and Coercion: The GDR as Welfare Dictatorship" in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-cultural History of the GDR* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 57-62.

environmental dissidents and why the SED ultimately failed. Third, this work attempts to better comprehend the ways in which dissidents and the SED, respectively, reached out to the general East German public. In the 1980s, the SED leadership promoted environmental protection through various organizations, emphasizing traditional beautification projects and preservation. Alternatively, the environmental dissidents contended that the regime did not deal with the sources major environmental problems facing East Germans and accordingly provided an alternative narrative much darker than the SED's rosy picture. Therefore, although the SED succeeded in creating institutions and rhetoric that promoted environmental protection, it held a fundamentally different understanding of environmentalism. The dissidents, on the other hand, created an alternative narrative that exposed the SED's inadequacies in comprehensively addressing major ecological problems, which in turn discredited the regime's claim to rule in the interest of its people and ultimately threatened its legitimacy.

Scholarship on socialist public spheres and civil society provides analytical framework for better understanding these tensions. Totalitarian scholarship, especially in the earlier Cold War context, has generally denied the existence of a public sphere in communist systems, because the state tightly regulated freedom of speech and monopolized their citizens' access to information.<sup>4</sup> Yet this scholarship does not explain

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<sup>4</sup> The debate over the nature of the East Germany's dictatorship has raged for over two decades. In Sigrid Meuschel's *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), she argues that the civil society had "withered away", leaving nothing but a totalitarian state and an oppressed people. In the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall, many academes and historians, such as Hermann Weber in *DDR: Grundriß der Geschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), essentially agreed with that assessment. Others, particularly those writing in the Anglo-American tradition, disagreed with the totalitarian model, arguing instead that East Germans resisted the regime's oppressive nature and lived their lives largely independently of the state. The foremost scholar in this field is Mary Fulbrook. Her work, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) first demonstrated the existence of East German life and social activity beyond the reaches of the state, while her newer work, *The People's State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005) reaffirms and furthers this argument. More recently,



the rise of environmental and other dissident movements in the 1980s in the GDR. In examining the environmental dissidents, it becomes evident that these groups participated in a public space, albeit it very limited, not unlike David Bathrick's concept of the subpublic. It is, he argues, an isolated group of individuals under dictatorship that raised issues on various topics and discussed them. Although not very connected to society at large, especially before 1986, the environmental subpublic provided a space for similarly-minded people to come together to discuss ecological matters and share information.<sup>5</sup> In 1989-1990, then, the environmental subpublic became a central component of the citizens' movements and exemplified the emergence of an independent civil society. Civil society, in this case, refers to a "type of social action" in an arena or a sphere connected to but separate from the state and that has "some utopian features," such as environmental concerns.<sup>6</sup>

Although dissent in the GDR has received considerable scholarly treatment over the last three decades, the environmental movement has rarely received attention independent of the opposition as a whole. Scholars of the GDR have not used the environment as a means by which to understand broader relationships within GDR society. Many histories of the GDR have focused on the docile nature of the populace without examining the dissidents, such as Sigrid Meuschel's thesis that society "withered

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Konrad Jarausch's *Dictatorship as Experience* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), Thomas Lindenberger's *Herrschaft und Eigen-sinn in der Diktatur* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1999) and Eli Ruben's *Synthetic Socialism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008) have argued for a more nuanced understanding in which the state and people interacted with one another and influenced policy and personal decisions.

<sup>5</sup> For a more complete discussion of a socialist public sphere and subpublics, see David Bathrick's *The Powers of Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Kocka, "Civil Society in Historical Perspective" in *Civil Society: Berlin Perspectives*, ed. John Keane (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 40.

away” under the SED-dictatorship.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, others such as Ehrhart Neubert have focused on opposition, but environmentalists have remained peripheral to these broader narratives which often focus on the role of the Protestant Church. Concentrating on environmental dissidence, however, reveals new understandings of how SED leadership and dissidents interacted with one another and of how the SED attempted to address post-materialist concerns raised by a number of growing social movements.

To investigate the dynamics between the dissidents and the SED, I will use a broad source-base that offers a variety of perspectives on the environment and the environmental movement. I utilize government reports and descriptions of environmental conditions to better understand the issues about which environmental dissidents were most concerned. When investigating this topic, I also rely on information published by western media before the fall of the Wall as well as East German information declassified in 1989. The most cited report is the 1990 *Umweltbericht der DDR* (Environmental Report of the GDR), which disclosed previously classified data. To get at the dissidents’ and citizens’ movements perspectives, I examine one environmental dissident newsletter, *Umweltblätter*, and the platform statements of the newly created citizens’ movements. I also utilize the Round Table discussions to illuminate the relevance of the environment to their programs. Alternatively, for a better understanding of the SED’s official attitude toward the environment, I turn to the SED newspaper, *Neues Deutschland* and secondary literature on SED environmental policy. Lastly, in investigating the situation of the environment in the reunification process, I examine Helmut Kohl’s Ten Point Program for Reunification and the environmental treaties of the spring and summer of 1990.

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<sup>7</sup> Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft: zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR, 1945-1989* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), 32.

The structure of the paper is primarily chronological, although partially thematic. The first section delves into the environmental problems that East Germany faced in the 1980s and traces the ecological deterioration and growing awareness of it between 1980 and 1990. The second section then traces early Church and SED responses to environmental dilemmas, including the changing position of the Protestant Church in the GDR and the SED's creation of the Society for Nature and Environment (*Gesellschaft für Natur und Umwelt*, GNU). The third section addresses a caesura in the East German environmental movement in the aftermath of the nuclear accident in Chernobyl, Ukraine in 1986. This section recounts the environmental movement's new momentum and a broadened support base after Chernobyl. The fourth section investigates the ways in which the SED publically sought to control information over the environment and limit dissident influence. Finally, the fourth section examines the period between the summer of 1989 and October of 1990 looking at how both dissidents and the West German government employed the environment in their attempts to delegitimize the SED, instigate reform, and eventually support reunification.

## CHAPTER 2

### PHYSICAL PLACES, CONTESTED SPACES: ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS IN THE GDR IN THE 1980S

In the 1980s, ordinary citizens witnessed and experienced the deterioration of environmental conditions throughout the GDR. Although they did not know the full extent of the degradation, the issues highlighted in this section are ones that affected large segments of the population and were either visible to the casual observer or common knowledge. The two most pervasive sources of pollution in the GDR were the mining and burning of *Braunkohle* (lignite) for energy and the chemical industry.<sup>8</sup> Both had broad impacts on ecological conditions around the country, most noticeably smog and *Waldsterben* (death of the forest). Though certain regions experienced higher concentrations of pollution, such as the Chemical Triangle (Leuna, Buna, and Bitterfeld, now in Saxony-Anhalt), the entire country was subject to significant pollution.<sup>9</sup> Thus, understanding environmental conditions and awareness in the 1980s helps to explain why the environment became a site of contention between the SED leadership and the dissidents.

The GDR's use of Braunkohle created many problems for the environment. First, the industry extracted the coal were open pit mines (*Tagebaue*), which were little more

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<sup>8</sup> Lignite is soft coal, as opposed to anthracite, which is harder and denser and therefore burns more cleanly and efficiently. While the Ruhr in West Germany contained mostly anthracite, the GDR had only lignite as an energy source.

<sup>9</sup> For maps of major power plants in the GDR and population centers, see Appendix A.

than massive holes in the ground. Miners then used huge machines to claw at the streams of lignite under the surface of the earth, destabilizing the ground around it and fundamentally changing the landscape. Up to the end of the 1980s, these massive open pit mines consumed nearly 470 square kilometers of land in the GDR, or roughly the size of five thousand soccer fields across the GDR, with the highest concentration being in the area around Leipzig.<sup>10</sup> The mines, however, were poorly constructed, causing the earth around them to soften and destabilize. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, the structurally questionable expansion of these open-pit mines required numerous villages to be resettled because the land was no longer safe to live on. The best known case was at Espenhain, near Leipzig, which required the resettlement of approximately fifteen villages and 7,800 inhabitants between the years 1951 and 1988, over three thousand of whom were removed between 1977 and 1988.<sup>11</sup> But the effects of the mines and the lignite extended beyond those resettled, which itself caused local resentment.

By the late 1980s, the GDR had the third highest gross domestic level of energy consumption in the world, behind only Canada and the United States. However, its production was nowhere near comparable, because the energy was incredibly inefficient.<sup>12</sup> Because lignite does not burn as efficiently as anthracite (black coal as opposed to brown coal), more of it must be burned in order to create the same amount of energy. The combination of the GDR's level of energy consumption and its inefficient coal resulted in high levels of air pollution. The resulting smog, soot, and other forms of

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<sup>10</sup> Sigrun Kabisch, Sabine Linke, „Seitdem sie eine Zukunft haben, sprechen die Menschen auch wieder über ihre Vergangenheit – vom Leben am Tagebaurand“, <http://www.ufz.de/data/192-2003096.pdf>, 193.

<sup>11</sup> *Lausitzer und Mitteldeutsche Bergbau-Verwaltungsgesellschaft mbH*, “10 Jahre Sanierungsbergbau mit Tagebaugroßgeräten” (2000).

<sup>12</sup> *Umweltbericht der DDR: Information zur Analyse der Umweltbedingungen in der DDR und zu weiteren Maßnahmen*: Institut für Umweltschutz, West Berlin (1990), 9.

air pollution from burning lignite left a film of black residue on building, cars, plants, and people's lungs when they inhaled.<sup>13</sup> Visitors to the GDR often commented on the smell and the grayness of the buildings, while East Germans often remarked how much cleaner and brighter everything appeared in the West.<sup>14</sup> Just crossing the border from the West to East Germany, the air quality was visibly different.

Another source of pollution from burning coal was sulfur dioxide, which contributed directly to *Waldsterben*. By the end of the 1980s, the GDR had the highest sulfur dioxide emissions per unit of area of any country in Europe.<sup>15</sup> The coal in the GDR often had other elements and minerals mixed in, particularly high levels of sulfur, which contributed to the creation of acid rain.<sup>16</sup> Acid rain, in turn, damaged or killed the forests in the GDR and anywhere the wind patterns carried the pollutants regardless of national borders.<sup>17</sup> Estimates from the *Environmental Report on the GDR*, published in 1990, suggested that acid rain alone damaged up to 38 percent of the GDR's forests by 1988.<sup>18</sup> This report used data collected by the East German Environmental Ministry, but which had remained classified until the dissolution of the GDR in 1989-90. In the district

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<sup>13</sup> For a fictional description of the conditions in the Chemical Triangle, see Monika Maron's *Flight of Ashes* (New York: Readers International, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> Gudrun Keitel, Conversation, May 2, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> *Umweltbericht der DDR: Information zur Analyse der Umweltbedingungen in der DDR und zu weiteren Maßnahmen*: Institut für Umweltschutz, West Berlin (1990), 9.

<sup>16</sup> When the coal was burned, this sulfur reacted with oxygen in the air to produce sulfur dioxide. Once in the atmosphere, the sulfur dioxide reacted with hydroxyl radicals in the air to produce sulfuric acid, commonly referred to as acid rain.

<sup>17</sup> This is one of the difficulties in regulating pollution. Often pollutants from one country or region cross borders via air or waterways, making it virtually impossible for the affected country to effectively regulate the pollution.

<sup>18</sup> *Umweltbericht der DDR*, 28. Merrill Jones, "Origins of the East German Environmental Movement," *German Studies Review* (May 1993), 236.

(*Bezirk*) surrounding Halle, 57 percent of the trees were reported to have some level of damage, while in Leipzig, on the other side of the Chemical Triangle, 75 percent of the forest had at least some level of damage from acid rain.<sup>19</sup> The effects of acid rain were most noticeable and best-documented in the forest, but they also damaged on crops, gardens, buildings, and even cars.

Areas with high concentrations of industry, most notably the Chemical Triangle, were particularly prone to poor environmental conditions, sometimes to the detriment of the health of the local population. The air pollution from energy plants and chemical factories was particularly bad, because factories rarely installed filters or scrubbers in smokestacks. Even in the limited cases where there were filters, no one replaced them when they broke. Scrubbers, which use water or a dry reagent to remove acidic gases and particles from the air before leaving the smokestack, were unheard of in the GDR. By 1990, when statistics became available, doctors in the Chemical Triangle estimated that “at any given time 60% of the population suffers from respiratory ailments,” including chronic bronchitis and conjunctivitis.<sup>20</sup> Even as clean-up began during the reunification process in 1990, experts recommended that no child under the age of ten live in the area.

The pollution from the chemical industry affected not only the air, but the water and soil as well. Again, contaminated water supplies and soil conditions affected the health of the local population. The chemical industry’s antiquated processes of production, mostly synthetic rubber and plastics, also resulted in considerable amounts of harmful byproducts, which the government did little to regulate. The emissions and

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<sup>19</sup> *Umweltbericht der DDR*, 28.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Charles, “East German Environment Comes into the Light,” *Science* (Jan 1990), 274.

runoff from local chemical plants nearly destroyed the natural landscape. Estimates suggested that a single chemical plant – Buna, in the Chemical Triangle – dumped twenty kilograms of mercury into the Saale River *per day*. That was ten times the *annual* amount discarded by the (largest West German chemical firm, BASF).<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the lack of water treatment further contributed to the poor local water conditions. In 1988, according to the East German government’s own standards, forty-five percent of drinking water in the GDR was considered no longer useable, while another thirty-five percent was “economically very expensive” to make drinkable.<sup>22</sup> In other words, only twenty percent of the drinking water in the GDR was fit for drinking.

While these conditions described the environment only in the last year or two of the GDR, the picture they present is representative of the decade as a whole. Over the course of the 1980s, then, East Germans experienced deteriorated environmental conditions, which affected their daily lives through the air they breathed, the water they drank and the *Waldsterben* they observed. Additionally, perceptions of environmental conditions changed as more East Germans became aware of the problems facing their natural landscape. As environmental dissidents gathered momentum in the 1980s, the disconnect between the SED’s self-proclaimed obligations and its actions became increasingly apparent. They began to use the environment as a means to challenge both the state’s authority and its monopoly over care for the environment. Thus, environmental activists and the state began to clash over both a physical space (the natural environment) and a public, political one (the dissemination of knowledge about ecological conditions).

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<sup>21</sup> Merrill Jones, “Origins of the East German Environmental Movement,” *German Studies Review* (May 1993), 236.

<sup>22</sup> *Umweltbericht der DDR*, 36.



## CHAPTER 3

### EARLY MOVEMENTS, LIMITED INFLUENCE: 1978-1985

Environmentalists in the early 1980s had two officially recognized spaces in which they could meet to discuss their issues. The first official space was the Society for Nature and Environment (GNU, *Gesellschaft für Natur und Umwelt*) as a department in the Culture Association (*Kulturbund*), which the SED created in 1980. Its aims were “the creation of an environmental consciousness in the GDR, the channeling and use of the already existing environmental consciousness, the creation of a lobby for environmental protection, and the practical support for environmental protection.”<sup>23</sup> Some have called this sort of organization a “safety valve” that allowed citizens a forum in which to express their concerns on a given topic without challenging the state.<sup>24</sup> Through the creation of this group the SED could “channel” the environmental movement and in doing so, they could also greatly circumscribe what environmentalists could achieve. Nevertheless, the GNU provided an official space for the environmentally-conscious to address problems that did not challenge the regime’s legitimacy.

Alternatively, environmentalists could meet with more freedom under the aegis of the Protestant Church. Using the Church offered environmentalists two particular benefits that the GNU lacked. First, they could develop a more critical space to discuss ecological

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<sup>23</sup> Gerhard Würth, *Umweltschutz und Umweltzerstörung in der DDR* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 1985), 101.

<sup>24</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xix.

issues.<sup>25</sup> As the only institution in the GDR not directly controlled by either the SED or the state apparatus, the Protestant Church both sheltered known oppositionists and as well as fostered new forms of dissent.<sup>26</sup> Second, the greater independence that the Church provided, allowed for the creation an autonomous network, or environmental subpublic, outside the reaches of SED control. This subpublic remained an essentially closed circuit, with little influence on the broader society, but allowed the beginnings of a movement to take root beneath the surface. Moreover, the Christian rhetoric that these groups employed added to its legitimacy. Thus, the Protestant Church played a critical role in cultivating environmentalists and environmental dissidents, in shaping how the environmental movement developed, and in undermining the legitimacy of the SED in the early 1980s.

In some ways, the SED encouraged environmental activism and succeeded through the creation of the GNU to create a level popular support in the official space that the state offered. Before the GNU was founded in 1980, its predecessor had been the “Friends of Nature and the Habitat [*Heimat*],”<sup>27</sup> and although the GNU was larger and slightly redefined, it oversaw many of the same projects as before, suggesting that the SED’s mode of environmentalism did not extend beyond traditional conservation efforts.

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<sup>25</sup> One feature that distinguished the East German environmental movement from Western ones was its Christian rhetoric and organization. For a more general discussion of West versus East German social movements see Roland Roth and Dieter Rucht (eds), *Die Sozialen Bewegungen in Deutschland seit 1945, Ein Handbuch* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag GmbH, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> The Concordat of 1978 established the role of the Protestant Church in the GDR as the “Church in socialism.” In return for a more cooperative stance toward the state, the Church was recognized some authority, status and security. For more information on the Church’s place in East German society, see Mary Fulbrook’s *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*.

<sup>27</sup> *Heimat* does not translate well into English. It is both the physical habitat in which one lives, but it is also the home. The German movement and tradition of protecting the *Heimat* reaches back in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

These tasks included the maintenance of public memorials, as well as history of the habitat or home [*Heimatgeschichte*]. In his work on dissidence in East Germany, Gareth Dale argues that the concerns of the environmentalists were sometimes “consonant with the interests of the regime.” Unfortunately, the regime’s conception of environmentalism also led to relatively trivializing schemes such as campaigns as “schemes to protect hedgehogs from traffic.”<sup>28</sup>

Despite its restrictive parameters, the GNU gained relatively widespread support. When the GNU was founded in 1980, it already had 36,000 members and grew to over 50,000 by 1989, particularly emphasizing the participation of young people and SED youth group, the FDJ (*Freie Deutsche Jugend*, Free German Youth).<sup>29</sup> Members of the GNU took part in campaigns such as planting trees in heavy populated areas and cleaning up neighborhoods. Such projects had visible results, which made neighborhoods more attractive and raised goodwill towards the SED. Additionally, the GNU organized regional conferences about local problems and new technologies that would help solve them. Invariably, though, these conferences, such as one in Dresden in 1982, had “an optimistic tenor” while “natural shortages and ecological crisis were not discussed.”<sup>30</sup> The SED, therefore, promoted participation that could be understood as support for the regime, yet limited that participation in order to control the level of criticism directed at its ability to care for the environment.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Gareth Dale, *Popular Protest in East Germany, 1945-1989* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 103.

<sup>29</sup> Hermann Behrens, et al. *Wurzeln der Umweltbewegung: Die „Gesellschaft für Nature und Umwelt“ (GNU) im Kulturbund der DDR* (Marburg: BdWi-Verlang, 1993), 52-64.

<sup>30</sup> Würth, *Umweltschutz und Umweltzerstörung in der DDR*, 102.

But these small projects belied, or “bracketed out” the larger problems.<sup>32</sup> The SED was only willing and able to protect the environment in a very limited way and lacked a sufficient mechanism for procuring either feedback or more effectively dealing with the problems that concerned the citizens. Emblematic of this situation, the SED released an order in 1982 to classify all information regarding environmental damage.<sup>33</sup> From then until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, official information about environmental conditions remained unpublished and hidden from the public. Increasingly, this stifling situation led a small subset of East Germans to claim new spaces and means of expressing their concerns outside of the GNU, often leading them to find refuge in the Church.

In contrast to the SED-organized GNU, groups within the Protestant Church used the Church’s relative freedom to address a wider variety of ecological concerns that the GNU and high level party officials were ignoring. This development of a small but critical subset on environmental issues resulted in what could be called an environmental subpublic: a somewhat insular but critical network of concerned citizens who criticized the SED’s inaction on major environmental problems, such as air pollution, increasing traffic and *Waldsterben*. Taking the case of the *Kirchliche Forschungsheim Wittenberg* (Ecclesiastical Research Center in Wittenberg, KFH) as one group within the environmental subpublic, it highlights some of the differences between the GNU and the oppositional environmentalists and defines the contours of this environmental subpublic.

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<sup>31</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005, 235.

<sup>32</sup> Fulbrook, *The People’s State*, 261.

<sup>33</sup> Merrill Jones, “Origins of the East German Environmental Movement,” *German Studies Review* (May 1993), 236.

The director of the KFH and Protestant theologian Hans-Peter Gensichen organized research, seminars, and pamphlets on the environment.<sup>34</sup> One particularly well-known treatise that Gensichen wrote in 1979, *The World is to be Saved*, became widely circulated in the GDR and raised awareness for the group. Yet, the Center's efforts failed to instigate a broader movement beyond those already active in the Church. Peter Gensichen, while a leader of a semi-dissident movement, proved to be relatively cooperative with the State and the Church, thus the KFH became an intermediary between SED organizations like the GNU and more radical activists. Though more independent than the GNU, the KFH and other early groups remained relatively harmless in their actions and critiques of the regime. Even without explicit cooperation, the SED increasingly watched over environmental subpublic, which it perceived as challenging the state through the work of unofficial informants. The infiltration of Stasi informants and the debate over courses of action thus created tensions that resulted in a fractured movement.

As the decade progressed and environmental conditions deteriorated, protests began to shift to larger, more encompassing problems. Bicycle demonstrations, such as the one in Berlin in 1982, protested the growing number of cars and resulting air pollution in East Germany by riding their bicycles through the streets and disrupting traffic. Additionally, local discussions of the general state of the environment in a given area gained popularity. In her 1993 article on the East German environmental movement, Merrill Jones argues that by the late 1980s roughly one hundred environmental groups

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<sup>34</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR 1949-1989* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 228.

existed in the GDR, each averaging between ten and thirty members.<sup>35</sup> These groups proved increasingly difficult for the SED to control, because they pushed for higher environmental standards than the state could provide or even comprehend. But the real moment of change for the East German environmental movement and the coalescence of a critical subpublic were yet to come.

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<sup>35</sup> Merrill Jones, "Origins of the East German Environmental Movement," *German Studies Review* (May 1993), 235.

## CHAPTER 4

### CHERNOBYL AND THE GROWING ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

On April 26, 1986, two separate but nearly simultaneous explosions at the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl, Ukraine released more nuclear material into the air than the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. The radioactive gas and particles dispersed as far as Sweden, both Germanys, Yugoslavia, and western Russia, making it impossible to eat certain foods grown outside and at considerable risk to people's health.<sup>36</sup> The Soviet Union denied that the explosions had even occurred until April 28 and in East Germany, officials did not report on or even acknowledge the accidents until May 2. With the nuclear accident at Chernobyl and the SED's efforts to deliberately not inform the general public about the accident, East Germans' unease with their regime's handling of environmental conditions reached a turning point.

Environmental conditions and the potential for nuclear disaster in the GDR gave the fragmented environmental movement new momentum – and new sympathizers. The small but growing subpublic increasingly demanded and received more attention, providing a narrative that directly addressed the environmental problems that the SED avoided and demanding reform from which the SED shirked. In doing so, these environmental dissidents also infringed upon the SED's supposed monopoly over the public space, expanding their influence by reaching out to a broader segment of the East

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<sup>36</sup> Feshbach, Murray and Friendly, Jr. *Ecocide in the USSR: Health and Nature Under Siege* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 12-13.

German population and supplying information about ecological conditions that the SED leadership withheld. Therefore, in light of the environmental situation in the GDR and Chernobyl, the alternative narrative that the environmental dissidents offered resonated with a broader subset of the population and challenged the SED's ability properly care for its citizens.

In the months after Chernobyl, new environmental groups sprang up across the GDR and already existing ones expanded. One particularly influential environmental group was the Environmental Library (*Umweltbibliothek*, UB) in Berlin and which can be considered as exemplary of the larger movement. Founded in 1986, largely in response to the lack of satisfying information about the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, the UB was a physical space (a library) as well as a group of dissidents.<sup>37</sup> On September 2, the library opened its doors to the general public, offering a few dozen books on environmental topics to anyone who was interested in learning more about ecology and the natural environment. According to Wolfgang Rüdtenklau, one of the founders, the UB had about fifty members when it opened.<sup>38</sup> Over the next three years, the group's membership increased, but even more than the growing numbers of supporters, the group's publication, *Umweltblätter*, represented the expanding influence and networking of the environmental subpublic as a whole.

The *Umweltblätter* served two purposes. First, the newsletter was a means of communication within the environmental dissident subpublic. Second, it sought to reach a broader population, trying to preach beyond the already converted. The group initially

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<sup>37</sup> The members of the UB had previously been associated with a different congregation in Lichtenberg, Berlin and had a different name, but moved to the Zion Church in September of 1986.

<sup>38</sup> Rüdtenklau, Wolfgang. *Störenfried: DDR Opposition, 1986-1989, Mit Texten Aus Den "Umweltblättern"* (Berlin: BasisDruck, 1992), 69.



printed the newsletter to spread information about the accident at Chernobyl and the general state of the peace and environmental movements in East Germany, but it eventually covered information on a number of dissident movements both in the GDR and in other Eastern European countries. In the period between 1986 and 1989, it became one of the most successful Samizdat, or underground, publications in the GDR, by offering an alternative narrative that appealed to an increasing number of East Germans. *Umweltblätter* expanded on concerns that many East Germans had and cited information from Western news sources to provide information that the SED did not print. When the newsletter began in the fall of 1986, the UB printed between 150 and 200 copies, but by 1989 circulation had mushroomed to over 2000;<sup>39</sup> making it the most widely read underground publication in the GDR.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, the expanding content of the newsletter in the years between 1986 and 1989 further suggested that a segment of the population was discontented with the regime on a number of topics ranging from human rights to peace to feminism to foreign policy. In exposing and explaining situations that the regime was not reporting, the environmental dissidents at the UB were able to describe ecological problems and rally support for action.

Along with increasing circulation, the newsletter eventually evolved into a more extensive magazine, covering a broader range of topics and in greater depth. In 1986, the newsletter appeared every two to three months and consisted of five to fifteen pages of content. In comparison, by 1988, the magazine ranged between forty and sixty pages and included articles from general GDR news to developments in the rest of Eastern Europe.

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<sup>39</sup> We can assume that readership was even higher, as each paper was typically passed around to family members and circles of friends.

<sup>40</sup> German History in Documents and Images, Robert-Havemann Gesellschaft, [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=2836](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=2836)

Given the breadth of *Umweltblätter*'s topical coverage, it provided a relatively accurate indication of the changing political climate in East Germany, both within the environmental movement and in East Germany as a whole.

The publication, however, remained largely dedicated to the environment, including a special section entitled "Daily Radioactive." It focused on the ever-present fear of nuclear spills, the impact of ones that had already occurred, and daily radiation levels reported from West Berlin sources. Coverage often included follow-up information on Chernobyl, even two or three years from the date of the actual accident. Even in 1988, *Umweltblätter* included a short article as a reminder of the events at Chernobyl and organized a small memorial for it:

On April 25 at 12 o'clock, the Environmental Library will gather to remember the reactor-catastrophe. We call on all grassroots organizations and congregations to follow our example. All over our country, the ringing bells and the prayerful should take responsibility for the destiny of our country and send a message to those in power.<sup>41</sup>

The excerpt exemplified how closely tied the movement remained to its roots and to the church, even as it expanded its focus.

In the initial fallout from Chernobyl in the summer and fall of 1986, through the newsletter the dissidents challenged the state's ability to provide for physical safety for its citizens. Chernobyl represented a failure of the state, and really the whole Soviet project, to care for its people, as demonstrated through one often reprinted article in *Umweltblätter*. The article, entitled "What Happened?" discussed its effects on the local population, as well as what the spill might mean for Berliners. Beginning with information on how radioactivity affects humans, the article's tone reflected a seriousness and deep concern for both the short and the long term effects of the Chernobyl accident.

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<sup>41</sup> Untitled Announcement in "Täglich Radioaktiv" in *Umweltblätter* (April 1988).

It detailed what happens to the body after being exposed to nuclear radiation, in the short as well as long run, and how different levels of radiation poisoning would first impair individual organs, then a higher level would alter blood composition, and even higher levels would be deadly.<sup>42</sup> The *Umweltblätter* recommended that Berliners not eat food from their gardens for two months after the accident and suggested that GDR nuclear energy plants were no safer than the Soviet ones, raising concerns that hit close to home. The article then concluded that “within a 30 kilometer zone of the energy plant, human life will not be possible in the foreseeable future.”<sup>43</sup> This interpretation varied dramatically from the information that the SED published in its newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*, which focused on the efficient clean-up process and rarely mentioned the resulting health and environmental problems.

The frequent reprinting of this one particular article indicated a sustained concern regarding the issue of nuclear energy and the potential for spills on the part of the dissidents. It also suggested that people continued to remain unsatisfied with the information provided by official sources on the catastrophe. As increases in circulation indicate, a growing number of East Germans, felt compelled to look beyond party-line information for the truth about what had happened. By using data from West German newspapers, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and other Western sources, the *Umweltblätter* were able to provide details about Chernobyl and the effects of radiation poisoning that the East German and Soviet

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<sup>42</sup> “Wie wirkt die Radioaktivitaet auf den Menschen?” *Umweltblätter* (May 1986).

<sup>43</sup> Morsche Meiler, “Was ist geschehen?” *Umweltblätter*, (May 1986).

news outlets completely ignored.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the dissidents' alternative narrative delegitimized the state's limited and uninformative response, and – while their representation of the issues was a rather grim one – it was one that a growing subpublic of East Germans was increasingly willing to break the law to read. In an abstract sense, the growing environmental subpublic was encompassing a larger public space and placing pressure on the official narrative.

Continuing to place pressure on the SED in the years after 1986, the environmental movement's focus broadened in both scope and scale. The increasingly diverse articles and number of issues addressed in the *Umweltblätter* exemplify the growing scope of the movement, while the expanded coverage from isolated local campaigns to regional, national, and even international events signified the dramatically increased scale. The *Umweltblätter* reflected this change and it tackled other environmental problems, along with addressing issues related to nuclear dangers. Particularly in the aftermath of Chernobyl, discussions of alternative energy sources took a central place in the newsletter. Articles, such as “Alternative Energy Sources – An Alternative?” presented readers with information about renewable energy sources and technological advances in those fields. The article's author, Martin, condemned the regime for its position that alternative energy sources, such as wind and solar, would only ever be “additive” and not a true alternative to coal and atomic energy.<sup>45</sup> Looking to Western examples, the article argued for more research and development of alternative

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<sup>44</sup> For a comparison of information released about Chernobyl, see the SED newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*, May 2 – May 15, 1986.

<sup>45</sup> Martin, “Alternative Energien – einen Alternative?” *Umweltblätter* (September 1986). No last name is provided in the article.

energy sources, as well as the implementation of them even in their technologically infant state. *Umweltblätter* reprinted this article, too, multiple times in the first year of the newsletter's existence.

Although Chernobyl dominated the *Umweltblätter's* coverage in the first months, the newsletter also covered other topics, meaning that Samizdat publications like *Umweltblätter* offered them a new forum, or space in which to be expressed and received. One topic that remained important to environmentalists in East Germany was Waldsterben. Multiple articles appear in the literature regarding the severity of damage to the trees and which kinds of trees were most affected by pollution. One such article describes an excursion into the forest outside of Rostock to examine the state of the trees. What they found was a "large loss of needles, shortening of the trunks, [and] *greiening* [here: premature aging] of the foliage among the new growth."<sup>46</sup> The mood of those in the excursion was one of pessimism and doubt that they could create the change they needed.

Environmentalists sometimes took other tactics to gain information and share it with the readers of *Umweltblätter*. Some of these tactics involved directly questioning state officials about certain environmental concerns, requesting information about a local problem, or attending public forums. Occasionally, *Umweltblätter* reprinted these exchanges or reports from forums so that the readership could see exactly how the state responded to issues they found important. In June of 1987, local officials held a meeting in Halle to address a petition that 216 residents had submitted expressing their concern about environmental conditions in the area. The meeting, however, was not open to the public, only a few of the petitioners were allowed to meet with the three officials present.

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<sup>46</sup> "Sorgen mit Kiefern," *Umweltblätter* (December 1988), 32-33.

In the meeting, “the general situation in Halle was explained calmly.” A flood plain not far from Halle, Elsteraue, was to be developed into a recreational park and there would be “continued efforts regarding carbides.” However, the “pollution of the Saale River in terms of slime was a difficult and currently unsolvable problem.” The problem of smog apparently came from the “hostile West,” because on “approximately 260 days a year, the wind blows from the West.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the SED was not responsible for the smog in Halle. The scathing tone with which the *Umweltblätter* reported the event implied both the ineptitude of the government to handle environmental problems and its weak attempts to misdirect the real sources of environmental degradation.

The environmental dissidents addressed a wide range of issues pertaining to the environment, which demonstrated their frustration with the regime on multiple issues, not just nuclear hazards. One of these other topics focused on industrial agriculture and livestock production in the GDR and its fertilizers, pesticides, and mass feedlots. In one case, nitrates from feces from a nearby farm contaminated the local water source. Though the nitrate levels were “200 times the legal maximum” the government claimed that the problem was “only aesthetic anyway – namely because of the stench.”<sup>48</sup> Another article exposed the conditions in the swine industry, both the conditions which the pigs endured and the deleterious effects on the environment.<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, this information was taken from a report produced by one of the local farms, a completely legal and seemingly innocuous source.

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<sup>47</sup> “Smog gibt es nicht – Gespräch im Rat der Stadt Halle zur Lage der Umwelt,” *Umweltblätter* (June 1987).

<sup>48</sup> “Nitratbedrohung für Köpenicker Grundwasser,” *Umweltblätter* (October 1987).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

Beyond the growth in numbers, groups within the environmental movement became more connected after 1986. Articles in *Umweltblätter* reported on environmental seminars, demonstrations and projects in a growing number of towns and cities. For example, in June of 1988, *Umweltblätter* described a seminar in Saalfeld, a town of about 50,000 people in the south of East Germany. A local ecology group organized to discuss general problems in the area and what to do about them. The report included the seminar's working definition of environmental protection, the problem of air pollution in and around Saalfeld, and the seminar's attendance of 130-150 participants. This size was double the anticipated turnout.<sup>50</sup> Another article promoted a bicycle demonstration that was to take place in Dresden. In earlier years, information about events had been limited to local circles and now the movement was developing ties between cities and groups, even if it remained small in terms of number of participants.

Not only did the environmental groups within the GDR begin to collaborate more, they also began to reach out to ecological groups in other Eastern bloc countries. Already in 1987, *Umweltblätter* reported on the Ecology Club based in Krakow, which estimated its membership at around 1000 in the area and 3000 in the whole country.<sup>51</sup> The article does not specify whether those totals were for that particular group, or all known ecology groups. By 1988, the newspaper began printing an entire section on Eastern Europe, often including reports from and discussions with Czech, Hungarian, and even a Bulgarian environmental group. The inclusion of environmental groups from other Eastern bloc countries suggested shared concerns over Chernobyl and the pollution

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<sup>50</sup> "Umweltforum in Saalfeld," *Umweltblätter* (June 1988).

<sup>51</sup> "Die polnische Club für Ökologie (PKE)," *Umweltblätter* (July 1987).

created by communist industry.<sup>52</sup> This shift from isolated local projects to an international cooperation indicated a fundamental change in influence of the dissident movement and its pressure on the state; it was acquiring more confidence in its dealings with the state through international connections.

Despite the growing support for the environmental movement in the late 1980s, many factors hindered any major success. One of the greatest difficulties the environmentalists faced was the strong rivalries between environmental groups, which made it difficult for groups to come together on major issues. Best known was the competition between the UB, which published *Umweltblätter*, and the *Grün-Ökologisches Netzwerk Arche (Arche-Nova)*. In 1988, members of the UB broke away and started their own environmental group, Arche-Nova, claiming that the UB did not focus enough on ecological concerns and accused the UB of being under the influence of Stasi informants. The leader of Arche-Nova, Carlo Jordan, had been a founding member of the UB in 1986 and involved in various environmental groups since the early 1980s. The goal of Arche-Nova, he said, was to bring together eco-groups from across the GDR to create a GDR-wide environmental movement. However, it failed to bring environmentalists together any more than the UB had, and furthermore, the Stasi also infiltrated Arche-Nova after its split from the UB.<sup>53</sup>

The UB and other groups therefore often faced attacks from multiple sides. The UB also had to contend with question of having stolen “the idea of an environmental library from the *Öko-Kreis Friedrichsfelde* [another environmental group in Berlin],

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<sup>52</sup> Padraic Kenney *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe, 1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 71-78.

<sup>53</sup> David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape and the Making of Modern Germany* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), 234.



thereby driving a wedge into the environmental movement.”<sup>54</sup> In a fictive interview between a journalist and the UB, the defensiveness of the environmental groups was apparent. The interviewer began with this statement: “In the past few weeks, there have been some discussions, accusations and perhaps misunderstandings about the Environmental Library. Above all, you’ve been accused of having not a coherent conception. What do you have to say about that?” The UB responded that they did indeed have a conception of what they wanted to do and that they would like to be able to “work together with [other local groups] to build the library.”<sup>55</sup> But with so many rivalries and strong personalities at stake, accomplishing common goals proved difficult.

As the 1980s progressed, environmental dissidence in East Germany became a component of the larger peace movement before gaining enough momentum to independently exert pressure on the regime. The dissidents showed their discontent with the regime’s policies through demonstrations as well as stating their demands in fliers and newspapers. Growing in popularity between 1986 and 1989, the environmental movement insisted on more regulation of factories, renewal of already damaged areas, as well as calls against the use of nuclear power plants. As the popularity of *Umweltblätter* indicates, East Germans found the dissidents’ alternative narrative increasingly compelling in the last years of the GDR. The circumscribed space in which the state had permitted environmental concerns had grown too constricting. New interest in environmental concerns after Chernobyl grew in force, number and urgency, which

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<sup>54</sup> “Die Umwelt-Bibliothek und der Friedens- und Umweltkreis,” *Umweltblätter* (October 1986), 1-2.

<sup>55</sup> “Die Umwelt-Bibliothek und der Friedens- und Umweltkreis,” *Umweltblätter* (October 1986), 1-2.

represented a subpublic that was pushing its limits. In fact, the subpublic was priming to become part of a nascent civil society.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE SED RESPONDS: RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVE

With increasing pressure from dissident groups, especially after Chernobyl, the SED leadership sought to combat the alternative narrative found in publications like *Umweltblätter*. The party, therefore, employed a number of tactics to reinforce its own narrative and improve its image on environmental issues. One method the SED used to achieve these goals was to publically reaffirm its official stance in its newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*. In the years between 1986 and 1989, the newspaper published an increasing number of articles highlighting how the regime was addressing environmental problems. The newspaper reiterated a rhetoric intended to reach out to people who were concerned about the environment but not as disenchanted as the radicalized environmental dissidents of *Umweltblätter*. By focusing on a segment of the population who still open to the possibility of party-led protection of the environment, the SED conceded some political space to the dissidents while holding on to or even winning back some of the less disaffected.

As before 1986, the SED continued to support small-scale projects and party-sanctioned ways of protecting the environment and report on them favorably in *Neues Deutschland*. These tasks were often carried out through organizations like the GNU and the Culture Association. One such campaign that featured prominently in *Neues Deutschland* throughout the 1980s was the *Mach mit!* (Take Part!) campaign. *Mach mit!*

encouraged GDR citizens to spend time planting trees and making their neighborhoods look more attractive. An examination of the articles about *Mach mit!* suggested that the regime considered these campaigns an appropriate way for citizens to protect the environment without becoming involved in a dissident organization or questioning the goals of the state. In fact, such public participation satisfied the dictatorial need for approval from the population. As one article stated, “The citizens’ engagement in creating green spaces in their neighborhoods has grown tremendously,” and a city gardener concluded that “It brings [me] joy to see how much is being invested to beautify our city.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, the SED reinforced its commitment to the environment on the one hand, while on the other hand proving that it could only focus on conservation and traditional forms of environmentalism.

Even the language used in the *Mach mit!* and other beautification campaigns reflected the communist understanding of success, which meant the larger the scale of the project the more successful the project was perceived to be. To reinforce the effectiveness of these beautification projects, *Neues Deutschland* framed them in the same way as the SED would a production target: by emphasizing the scale of the project in terms of number of participants or trees planted or area of land protected. The success of a campaign was thus often described in terms of how many trees were planted or hectares of nature preserve established.<sup>57</sup> By using such language, the SED hoped to garner support from the average citizen for the campaign. Therefore, it is not surprising to find headlines which read “Saturday is Planting Day for over 35,000 Trees,” “*Mach mit!*

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<sup>56</sup> Uwe Stemmler, “Schöneres Gesicht für 1300 Lichtenberger Höfe,” *Neues Deutschland* (January 11/12, 1986).

<sup>57</sup> A hectare is roughly 2.47 acres.

Operations all over the Republic” or “Many Act on Saturday to beautify the City” in *Neues Deutschland* in 1986. The problems underlying these campaigns, however, remained unaddressed. While *Mach mit!* focused on planting new trees and cleaning up parks, these campaigns did not address the causes of the problems, such as industrial pollution and burning Braunkohle.

The SED not only encouraged its citizens to participate in one-time actions, but also in on-going, long-term projects that involved commitment. One district in Berlin, Prenzlauer Berg, adopted a project so that “by the end of 1986, no street in this most-densely populated district in Berlin should be...without green.”<sup>58</sup> However, this project proposed a different, perhaps more compelling method by which to get citizens to participate. Each of the 5000 trees that the Five Year plan had slated for planting needed a sponsor and *Neues Deutschland* publically announced that locals would be paid fifteen East German marks a year per tree to take care of it. This method of attracting citizens to maintain the new trees reveals two insights into the mentality of the Party. First, these projects showed that the SED was serious about getting people involved in doing something for the environment, such as through the GNU. Second, it indicated exactly what kinds of projects the SED approved of. Tree-planting and caring for trees in your neighborhood were acceptable activities, because the party sanctioned them.

Through renewed emphasis on the environment, the SED reached out to GDR citizens concerned about environmental conditions who were not as radicalized as the dissidents. A prime example of this approach is an article which touts “White Sails in Lausitz’s Braunkohle District.” What had once been an open-pit Braunkohle mine, the regime converted and flooded into a lake for the benefit of the local community. The

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<sup>58</sup> “Für junge Bäume Paten gesucht,” *Neues Deutschland* (January 28, 1986).

author continued, declaring that fifty foreign delegates who had visited the lake were amazed at how a socialist country converted an old mine into an improvement of the social conditions of the workers.<sup>59</sup> In a similar project, *Neues Deutschland* provided a picture spread of the conversion of an open-pit mine into lake and recreation area near Cottbus with the headline “Silver Lake follows the ‘Black Gold.’”<sup>60</sup> Other examples of this self-glorification often involved reforestation projects, as in article boasting that East Germany’s “Green Lung” was predicted to grow 107.8 hectares by the next year.<sup>61</sup> This was, of course, in addition to the nearly 2300 hectares of forest and meadow under already protected as nature reserve.<sup>62</sup> In this way, the SED published information that reflected favorably on the state while simultaneously overlooking the larger issues, namely the sources of many of these problems.

When outsiders, such as a journalist from a West German paper, *Die Zeit*, directly questioned the ecological conditions in East Germany, SED leaders emphasized East Germany’s commitment to the environment. They categorically approved of every measure to protect it, while denying that certain problems existed at all. Calling attention to the GDR’s position as one of the first countries to create a ministry for environmental protection, the SED claimed the environment was in excellent condition. In an interview with *Die Zeit*, which was reprinted in *Neues Deutschland*, Erich Honecker stressed that East Germany “had already been active in the field of environmental protection for a long

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<sup>59</sup> Hans-Hermann Krönert, “Weiße Segel im Braunkohlerevier der Lausitz,” *Neues Deutschland* (July 10, 1986).

<sup>60</sup> “Dem ‘schwarzen Gold’ folgte der ‘Silbersee,’” *Neues Deutschland* (October 11/12, 1986).

<sup>61</sup> 107.8 hectares is about 266 acres, or about forty New York City square blocks.

<sup>62</sup> AND, “ ‘Grüne Lunge’ wächst um 107,8 ha,” *Neues Deutschland* (July 25, 1986)

time.”<sup>63</sup> In fact, Honecker claimed, East Germany’s problem with Waldsterben came not from their own pollution, but from Czechoslovakia to the south and that discussions were already under way to get it under control. And as for, acid rain, they had no experience with it. Denying the situation existed at all was one way in which *Neues Deutschland* tried to relegitimize the SED on environmental conditions.

In many instances, *Neues Deutschland* reported on East Germany’s cooperation and collaboration with both communist and capitalist states to address specific environmental concerns. In 1989 alone, these efforts included a new agreement with the Soviet Union, continuing discussions with Sweden and Czechoslovakia, and talks with West Germans. Typically, these meetings did not result in concrete measures to improve the environment. Rather, they usually concluded in niceties that resulted in minor policy changes, if any were agreed upon at all. For example, when the environmental minister from East Germany met with the minister president of one of the West German provinces, little of substance was discussed. Instead, “Overwhelmingly, [the two parties] stressed the importance of equal cooperation between the GDR and the FRG [Federal Republic of Germany, West Germany] and positive development in the preparation of the foundation for an agreement between the two states.”<sup>64</sup> In this way, East Germany expressed its interest in the environment, sympathy for its citizens’ concerns, and did not change its policies.

When the SED was uncertain about how to address concerns about the environment, it deflected attention by shifting focus to environmental problems in other

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<sup>63</sup> Erich Honecker, “Interview Erich Honeckers für BRD-Wochenzeitung “Die Zeit”, *Neues Deutschland* (January 31, 1986).

<sup>64</sup> “Zusammenwirken bei Lösung von Umweltaufgaben beraten,” *Neues Deutschland* (February 2, 1986).

countries, particularly in the West. On May 6, which was only four days after East German press began covering Chernobyl and ten days after the spill itself, *Neues Deutschland* published an article entitled, “1985: The USA’s Largest Number of Accidents in Nuclear Power Plants Yet.” In the article, the author described the “constantly growing number of minor accidents in American nuclear power plants.”<sup>65</sup> Also, referencing the 1979 nuclear spill at Three-Mile-Island, the message in the text called the Western (mis)use of nuclear power into question. The next day, in fact, the newspaper printed a second article emphasizing the “601 Security-Shutdowns in American Nuclear Power Plants in 1985.” As Soviet-style journalism was wont to do, it described the situation in terms of large numbers, such as the 601 shutdowns in 1985 and the 2974 minor accidents since 1979, to highlight the severity of disasters in the West. The intention, of course, was to shift public attention away from Chernobyl and to make the capitalist world look like the ones who were being careless with radioactive material.

Other articles regarding Chernobyl took a different approach. Instead of deflecting attention, they focused on the efficient and thorough clean-up process. On May 2, the first day that East German newspaper printed information about the accident, a *Neues Deutschland* article explained that “Special forces equipped with the newest technology have been deployed to clean up the contaminated areas.” It continued, “The Soviet Union has more than sufficient materials, as well as scientific and technical options to eliminate the ramifications of the disaster.”<sup>66</sup> Others then reported on the care being given to the clean up and details about how the radioactive material was being

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<sup>65</sup> “1985 größte Schadensserie in Kernkraftwerken der USA,” *Neues Deutschland* (May 6, 1986).

<sup>66</sup> “Vertreter der UdSSR informierte UNO-Vollversammlung über Havarie im Kernkraftwerk Tschernobyl,” *Neues Deutschland* (May 2, 1986).



collected and buried. Once the necessary steps had been taken, experts would decide if the energy plant could reopen. The mix of articles reflected a combination of deflection of the real issues, such as the conditions in the plant that precipitated the spill, and attention to how expediently the Soviet Union was taking care of the clean up. The *Umweltblätter* and its alternative interpretation, however, were demonstrating that the Soviet Union was not in fact handling the process as efficiently and thoroughly as *Neues Deutschland* reported.

Beyond reporting on the state of nuclear power plants in the West, *Neues Deutschland* covered oil spills, forest fires, and any other information it could use to divert attention from domestic environmental problems. In particular, the newspaper focused on ecological accidents and disasters in the Western world, so as to portray capitalist countries as the real, underlying problem when it came to environmental degradation. In the spring of 1986, *Neues Deutschland* reported on the destruction of the rain forest in Brazil, and in 1987, on the pollution of the Rhine River in Switzerland. A textile company near Basel had spilled enough dye in the river that “the water ran red for a length of five kilometers.”<sup>67</sup> By emphasizing environmental problems outside of the GDR, the SED sought to draw attention away from environmental conditions at home.

Most disconcerting to East Germans invested in ecology was not what *Neues Deutschland* published about the environment, but rather, the articles that appeared beside them on the page. The SED, on one hand, maintained that socialism and the environment did not contradict each other. Articles, such as “Environmental Protection a Sound Component of the [Economic] Plan,” claimed that industrial enterprise supported environmentally safe production. In fact, “Since the beginning of the 1970s, the industrial

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<sup>67</sup> “Rhein verschmutzt,” *Neues Deutschland* (April 30, 1987).

production of goods has nearly doubled and yet they have also succeeded in improving environmental conditions in many ways.”<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, though, the SED newspaper proudly published information that gave environmentalists reason to pause. For example, articles such as “135 Trains of coal come daily from the open-mine pits at Bitterfeld” or “Bitterfeld: [Chemical] Plant runs nearly twenty-four Hours a Day,” undermined the SED’s stance on the environment. The continued focus on industrial production belied any assertions about the importance of the environment. More fundamentally, it exemplifies how the SED was still fixated on socialist-materialist goals as the primary means of caring for its citizens. It simply did not understand their post-material concerns. The legitimacy of the system on productivist ground undermined their environmental legitimacy, because while different groups wanted contradictory goals the SED had to claim to fulfill a universalistic mission that satisfied everyone.

Despite the prominence of feints, deflections and other ploys in a public forum, such as *Neues Deutschland*, the SED proved unable to convince East Germans that their environment was healthy. Because the rhetoric of the state was so out of line with both the dissident narrative and the visible reality, the SED’s position seemed unsatisfying – more like fiction than anything else. The regime’s continued focus on industrial production, often at the expense of the environment, and ever-important task of over-fulfilling the economic plan did not mesh with the post-industrial issues of the environmental movement. The state remained focused on traditional socialist goals, like mining enough coal for the winter, yet its citizens had both material and post-material concerns on their minds. This disconnect contributed to the SED’s inability to adequately

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<sup>68</sup> “Schutz der Natur in der DDR fester Bestandteil der Pläne,” *Neues Deutschland* (May 26, 1986).

deal with the environmentalists' demands. Mary Fulbrook has argued that the East German state allowed its citizens to complain, just with the major issues "bracketed out." Similarly, in the case of the environment, the SED bracketed out the major problems in its newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*. By not adequately responding to these larger issues, such as to fears about accidents at nuclear power plants, industrial waste being dumped into the local water supply, or air pollution, the regime lost legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. Moreover, it lost legitimacy despite efforts to address concerns in a very public forum.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **1989-1990: THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE RETURN OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND RESTRUCTURING**

As debates surrounding political freedoms and the fate of the SED state dominated in the summer and fall of 1989, the role of environment and its activists has remained on the sidelines of that transformative story. Nevertheless, environmental dissidents continued to delegitimize the SED's rule by pointing to the GDR's ecological devastation and the discrepancy between the SED's rhetoric and its actions. Moreover, many of the new citizens' movements that sprang up in the fall of 1989 included some sort of ecological message in their platforms and their rhetoric. By using increasingly public forums that were entirely independent of the state or party to express their concerns, the citizens' movements, represented an emerging civil society would mark the end for the SED. In the period between September 1989 and October 1990, multiple groups and institutions pointed to environmental conditions as a reason for change in the GDR, including citizens' movements, the Round Tables, and even the Federal Republic (West Germany, FRG). Therefore, though the environmental discontent did not figure as centrally in these debates as the economy or political freedoms, ecological conditions continued to play a significant role in the reunification process – and a larger one than the historiography has thus far indicated.

Almost all of the citizens' movements founded in the fall of 1989 included environmental issues among their chief complaints with the state. In fact, many of them, such as New Forum, Democracy Now, Democratic Awakening, and Social Democratic Party, included prominent environmental dissidents among their founding members. Each of these groups made demands for not only legal and political change in the GDR but also for social and ecological transformation, and did so in increasingly public spaces.<sup>69</sup> Taking the New Forum as an example and exemplary of the citizens' movements helps to create a narrative of the movements' goals. The New Forum stated in its founding document from September of 1989, "On the one hand, we wish for an expansion of consumer goods and better supplies, while on the other hand we see the social and ecological costs and plea for a turn away from uninhibited growth."<sup>70</sup> Even as the political situation in the GDR changed and other issues became more pressing, environmental concerns remained a factor in the delegitimization of the SED and the crumbling structures of the GDR.

The New Forum's catalogue of problems from October of 1989 exemplified the importance of the environment in its political platform. The New Forum's first concern was the economy, which understandably received the most attention. But second to the economy was ecology. The citizens' movement's programmatic statement listed numerous concerns about developing a competitive market economy as well as expressing concerns about the "environmental damage (air, water, and ground pollution)

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<sup>69</sup> Some of these new groups, such as the Green League and the Green Party, specifically targeted environmental problems in their platforms. For the purposes of this section, I have chosen to focus on groups that were not purely environmentally-focused to better demonstrate the breadth of concern for the environment in the citizens' movements.

<sup>70</sup> Neues Forum, „Gründungsaufwurf: Eine politische Plattform für die ganze DDR,“ in *Entwürfe für einen anderen Sozialismus*, ed Gerhard Rein (Wichern-Verlag, 1990), 13.

that takes threatening forms for our children.”<sup>71</sup> It proceeded to cite other ecological issues, including energy policy, the estrangement of humans from nature, the consequences of different forms of pollution, and the limiting of consumer habits for future generations.

Because so many groups addressed green issues, specifically green citizens’ movements, such as the Green League and the Green Party, took longer to organize. For these specifically environmentally-focused groups, changing the way that the GDR was structured required “the renewal of our society.” For them, the transformation of their “devastated environment” was of “vital importance.”<sup>72</sup> Many of those connected to the Green League and the Green Party had been involved in various earlier environmental groups. For example, the Green Party was the party incarnation of the *Grün-Ökologisch Netzwerk Arche*, led by Carlo Jordan. However, after the fall of the Wall on November 9<sup>th</sup>, the post-material and reform-minded concerns of the citizens’ movements began to diverge from what most of the population wanted and the mass demonstrations in Leipzig and Berlin signified: more rights and freedoms, and better material conditions. With the dual pressure of the citizens’ movements and the growing demonstrations in Berlin, Leipzig and other cities, the SED came under increasing pressure to change policies and responded by changing its travel restrictions and opening the border.

In West Germany, the events in the East did not go unnoticed and in an unanticipated move on November 28, 1989, West German chancellor, Helmut Kohl,

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<sup>71</sup> Neues Forum, „Offener Problemerkatalog: Vom vormundschaftlichen Staat zum Rechtsstaat,“ in *Entwürfe für einen anderen Sozialismus*, 17.

<sup>72</sup> Grüne Partei, “Gründungsinitiative für eine Grüne Partei in der DDR” (November 1989), [http://www.ddr89.de/ddr89/inhalt/ddr\\_nf.html](http://www.ddr89.de/ddr89/inhalt/ddr_nf.html).

offered his Ten Point Program for German unity. In the program, Kohl indicated not only the importance of economic and political change in the GDR, but also that of environmental policy. In discussing ecological conditions in the GDR, among other shortcomings of its governing regime, Kohl both demonstrated solidarity with East Germans and further delegitimized the SED by promising to “intensify cooperation in the field of environmental protection.”<sup>73</sup> Two further points in the Ten Point Program returned to environmental considerations, proposing common German institutions and a pan-European environmental council, respectively. In showing support for environmental protection, the Program also drew support away from the socialist reformer groups who supported an anti-capitalist means of ecological renewal, such as Rudolf Bahro. Kohl’s program, therefore, pointed directly to the SED’s shortcomings, underlined the economy and the environment as two places where the SED had failed to properly provide for its citizens, while simultaneously discrediting more radical options.

When the Round Table talks of late 1989 and early 1990 began, the issue of the environment again infiltrated broader debates on the future of the GDR and potential reunification. At the Round Tables, where many of the newly formed citizens’ movement groups and later the SED, met to discuss the future of the East German state. Meeting sixteen times between December and March, with each meeting focusing on a specific theme, the Round Table discussions clarified the demands of the various citizens’ movements. First among their concerns was the “disclosure of the ecological, economic

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<sup>73</sup> Helmut Kohl, “Ten Point Program for German Unity,” November 28, 1989.

and financial situation in our country.”<sup>74</sup> Especially in terms of the environment, the Round Tables focused on an “ecologically-oriented social democracy based on justice and solidarity.”<sup>75</sup> What exactly ecologically-oriented social democracy should look like was not entirely clear, but the participants nevertheless agreed that environmental consciousness should be central to the new regime’s legitimacy.

On January 29, 1990, the Round Table discussion focused primarily on environmental concerns and reiterated the participants’ earlier call for the “incorporation of ecological principles into the structure of society and the economic development of the GDR.”<sup>76</sup> The Round Table participants laid out their basic principles regarding the environment and passed numerous resolutions. Among other their decisions, the participants determined that “production must be organized with strict attention to the requirements of ecology and environmental protection and the thrifty use of resources.”<sup>77</sup> Additionally, the Round Table stated measures that should be taken in order to bring about the proposed transition to an ecologically-friendly democracy. These measures included the education of politicians on ecological concerns, the implementation of new standards for industrial production, new energy and agricultural policies, as well as the establishment of environmental centers and ecological disciplines.<sup>78</sup> The Round Table’s resolutions displayed not only an optimism about the changes that the opposition could

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<sup>74</sup> Round Table Talks, December 7, 1989. Each of the Round Table discussions had a primary topic, such as the economy or the environment. Of the sixteen discussions, the fact that one focused solely on the environment is indicative of its importance to this period.

<sup>75</sup> Round Table Talks, December 7, 1989. [http://www.ddr89.de/ddr89/inhalt/ddr\\_nf.html](http://www.ddr89.de/ddr89/inhalt/ddr_nf.html)

<sup>76</sup> Round Table Talks, January 29, 1990.

<sup>77</sup> “Round Table Talks, January 29, 1990” in *Neue Chronik der DDR*, ed. Zeno and Sabine Zimmerling (Berlin: Verlag Tribüne, 1990), 141.

<sup>78</sup> “Round Table Talks, January 29, 1990” in *Neue Chronik der DDR*, 141-142.



implement but also addresses many of the issues that, in their opinion, delegitimized the SED-dictatorship in the first place. For a regime to properly provide for its citizens, it had to provide for their physical safety and well-being, which included protection of the natural environment. Thus, any regime that did not meet those expectations would lose credibility in the eyes of its citizens.

As the Round Table discussions progressed from December 7, 1989 to March 12, 1990, however, it became increasingly evident that the people of the GDR and the citizens' movements at the Round Table had different visions for the future. Bärbel Bohley, one of the founding members and leaders of the New Forum, noted as early as November that the masses and the citizens' movements were diverging. Another leading member of New Forum, Jens Reich, realized in the weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall that the masses listened less and less to the opposition groups.<sup>79</sup> With the March elections of 1990, this shift in East Germans' attention away from earlier concerns and reform became evident. The CDU-led Alliance for Germany, which promised freedom, unity and prosperity (*Freiheit, Einheit und Wohlstand*), won an astounding forty-eight percent of the vote, while the SPD (Social Democratic Party) finished far behind with twenty-two percent and Alliance 90 only received roughly three percent of the vote. These elections marked the death knell for the GDR, and with it hopes for a reformed socialism. This affirmation for unification with West Germany, which would be dominated by West German terms, also signaled the end of hope for an alternative future to both the East and the West, an "ecological-social" future. Because so many pro-West parties also adopted

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<sup>79</sup> "Jens Reich: Am wichtigsten ist die Befreiung von der Angst" in *Die Opposition in der DDR*, ed. Gerhard Rein (Berlin: Wichern-Verlag GmbH, 1989), 31.

environmental concerns into their platform, Alliance 90 lost its special status “green” status, and with it, much of its influence over the public debate.

Yet throughout the process of coordinating economies and legal codes, the environment remained a significant factor in the reunification debate. Addressed in the treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic establishing a Monetary, Economic and Social Union (18 May 1990), the Environmental Conditions Treaty (June 29, 1990), as well as the Unification Treaty, the environment was used as a tool to further delegitimize the GDR. Governmental reports, such as the one cited in section one, demonstrated the SED’s total disregard for its constitutional promise to care for nature and the environment. This obvious failing further bolstered the Federal Republic’s credentials, as did promises to clean up the pollution. Its much more stringent regulation became the standard for environmental protection in the East, and in this way the FRG could feel superior when it stated that the “most urgent is to provide measures for the protection [*Abwehr*] against dangers for the health of the population.”<sup>80</sup>

To a degree, then, the Federal Republic recognized that addressing environmental issues was one way in which the conservative West German government could create popular support for unification in the East. As Kohl’s Ten Point Program, the *Staatsvertrag* (Treaty between States) of May 1990, and the Environmental Framework Law demonstrate, West German concern for the environment was not empty and it therefore resonated with East Germans. The message here was clear: the Federal Republic would achieve in months what the SED had not been able to do in over twenty years of commitment to the environment: clean up the environmental pollution plaguing

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<sup>80</sup> "Einigungsvertrag vom 31. August 1990 (BGBl. 1990 II S. 889)"

East Germany.<sup>81</sup> And, in fact, the regulations and resources stipulated in these laws did improve the environmental conditions in eastern Germany in the years after reunification.<sup>82</sup>

For others, however, the institution of West German laws was a disappointment and represented the citizens' movements' inability to enact real policy change. Under the surveillance and control of the SED, this situation had been understandable, but with a return of an independent civil society and public sphere, these results were disheartening. Those dissidents and citizens who had truly sought to create an "ecological-social" regime found little comfort in the unification process and the domination of West German standards. After all, for those like Rudolf Bahro, capitalism was no friend to the environment either and the implementation of West German laws signified a lost opportunity. Instead of a green revolution with hope for a more sustainable future, West German policy was only marginally better, representing small but not major, structural change. In the context of a uniting Germany, the East German environmental dissidents lost both their isolation but also their privileged status as opponents of an unjust regime. Subsumed by a vibrant civil society that already existed in the West, the East German environmental dissidents struggled to find their place in a free public sphere.

The political and environmental situation in East(ern) Germany transformed dramatically in the year between the fall of 1989 and 1990. In examining the public discussions during that period, many of these changes become clear and even adopt new meaning. Central to the rise of citizens' movements and newly formed political parties,

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<sup>81</sup> It had been over twenty years since environmental protection had been inscribed in the 1968 constitution.

<sup>82</sup> The unintended consequence of the clean-up was large-scale deindustrialization and its resulting unemployment.

was the hope for a more ecological alternative to the SED rule. The emphasis on the SED's inability – or unwillingness – to effectively deal with pollution delegitimized its rule and affected even the average East German citizen. Not just active environmental dissidents, but all citizens of the GDR daily experienced the hazards of its industrial output and lack of environmental protection. Later, ecological conditions became an important component of Kohl's plan to reunite Germany and used it as a method to both legitimize and garner popular support for the union on the East German side. Despite disappointment in some corners, reunification – and new environmental standards – brought significant and visible improvements to the former East Germany.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Examining the East German environmental movement illuminates the triangular relationship between the SED, the dissidents and the ordinary people in the GDR. The dissidents demonstrated the ways in which the party did not follow through on its promise to care for its citizens materially, physically and environmentally. In drawing attention to these unfulfilled guarantees stated in the constitution of 1968, propaganda and other official rhetoric, dissidents challenged the SED's rule. Just as the regime promised to provide all rights and protections to its citizens, the SED also sought to control all parts of East Germans' lives. When environmental dissidents challenged the SED's claims, they detracted from the SED's monopoly of information, and more fundamentally, threatened its legitimacy.

Originally only small groups of East Germans were concerned about local environmental problems in the early 1980s, but the movement grew into a better-defined and active subpublic after the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl in April 1986. Through examining a widely-read peace and environmental dissident newspaper, *Umweltblätter*, the dissident environmental movement's major concerns in the transformational years between 1986 and 1990 become clearer. In this period, the subpublic evolved from a collection of grassroots groups concerned with local problems to a connected, statewide movement, addressing not only local concerns but also national and international ones.

Additionally, the growing environmental movement began to offer an alternative to the official narrative through its samizdat publications. The issues that dissidents raised in publications, such as *Umweltblätter*, and their actions resonated with the East Germans. The growing number of demonstrations and environmental activities after 1986 provide evidence for this argument, as do the expanding circulation and coverage of *Umweltblätter* itself. The alternative narrative found in dissident work thus exposed the inconsistencies in the SED-regime, detracted from its monopoly on the public sphere, and ultimately posed a serious threat to it.

The SED-regime attempted to counter the advances made by environmental dissidents through organizations, such as the GNU, and the party-line newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*. These efforts were not directed at dissidents, who were already quite disillusioned, but rather at average East Germans who might be comforted by the regime's limited efforts. Ultimately, though, the SED only conceived of environmentalism in terms of traditional conservationism, which could not properly address the massive problems that the system itself created. Furthermore, the SED-regime was so in debt to the West by the 1980s that it would have been impossible to devote resources to the causes of the people even if it had been willing to address them.<sup>83</sup>

Not only were the accusations of the environmentalists threatening to the regime, but so was the changing atmosphere which they represented. Environmental and other dissidents increasingly carved out public spaces for themselves independent, or semi-independent, within the socialist regime. These public spaces on the edges reflected the beginnings of a nascent civil society and a public sphere over which the SED had little or

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<sup>83</sup> Charles Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 59-107.

no authority.<sup>84</sup> In 1989-1990, the environmental movement, and others such as the peace movement, under the protection of the Protestant Church, began to organize more publically and more formally. The members of these overlapping groups founded citizens' movements, which published and publically challenged the SED. By the fall of 1989, the mood in the GDR had changed as East Germans gathered in the streets of Berlin and Leipzig, calling for major reforms.

Even after the Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989, the environmental concerns and the movement remained crucial to the reunification process. Besides the economy, the environment was one of the key factors that East and West Germans alike agreed on as point where the SED had failed. It served as a central discussion topic for one of the Round Table talks and was a point on which West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl often criticized the SED and the GDR. Through 1990, the reunification treaties specific treatment of environmental issues along with reports and the start of clean-up projects show that the environmental conditions remained important to both those in the East and the West. An examination of the environment, then, leads to a better understanding of how the SED became discredited in the GDR, how the reunification process took shape, and how East German people and spaces were folded into the Federal Republic.

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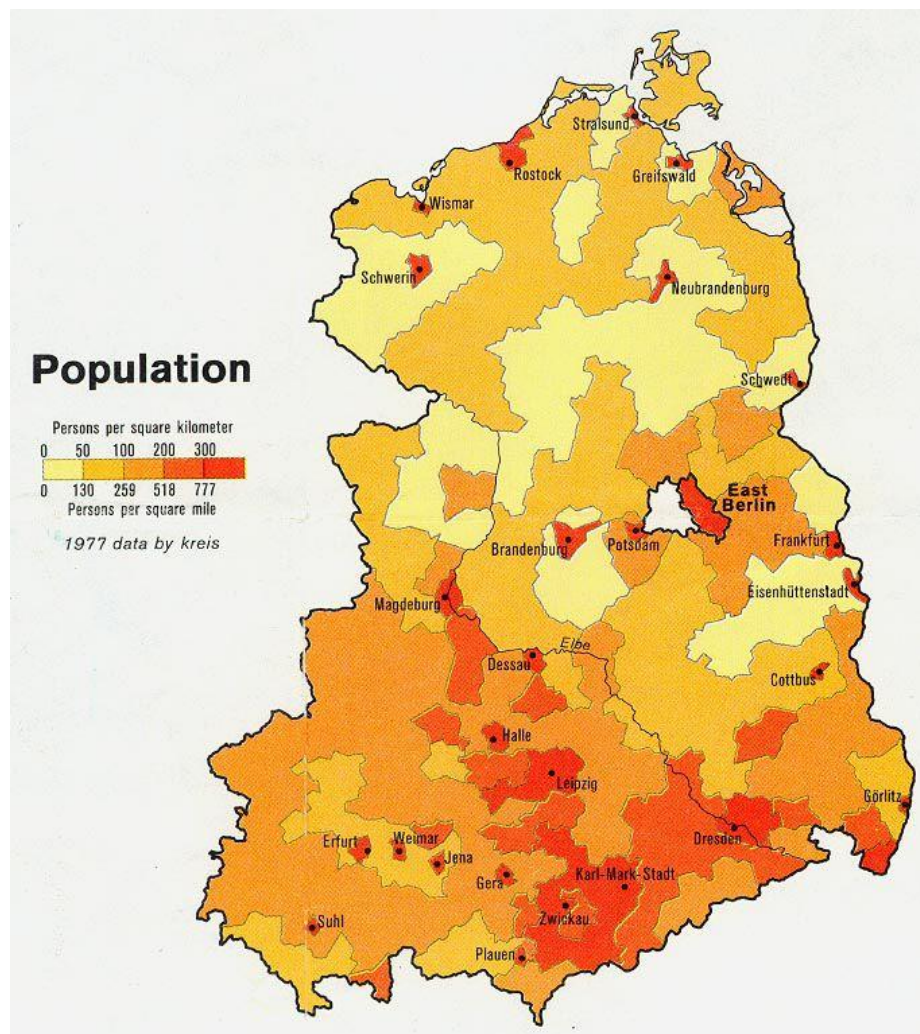
<sup>84</sup> David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech*, 45.

## 1. Major East German Power Plants





## 2. East Germany



**The densely populated area between Halle and Leipzig represents the Chemical Triangle.**

Source: eHistory contributors "Population Map of GDR," *eHistory @ The Ohio State University*, <http://ehistory.osu.edu/osu/origins/maps.cfm>.

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